# Why aren't you listening to me? a case study in conflict resolution

Dr. Monica Law
Marywood University

ABSTRACT

This case, based upon events that occurred within an undergraduate student club in a University, focuses on conflict resolution. The case was designed to introduce a concept on a level with which students can relate and transfer what they have learned in the case to application in the business environment. The primary objective of this case is to introduce students to the concept of functional conflict resolution. More specifically, this case gives students the opportunity to analyze five different resolution techniques and try to functionally resolve a conflict situation. It will also help to encourage discussion about behavior in their current environment and encourage students to think of situations in their current environments (school, work, home) as a basis to understanding complex situations that may occur in the business environment. This case is appropriate for use in various courses. For example, it may be used in an undergraduate or graduate Introduction to Management, Organizational Behavior, Foundations of Leadership, or Unions and Labor Relations course. It is appropriate for use in any course that covers the topics of conflict resolution, teamwork, behaviors, and personality.

Keywords: conflict resolution, conflict, functional conflict, teamwork
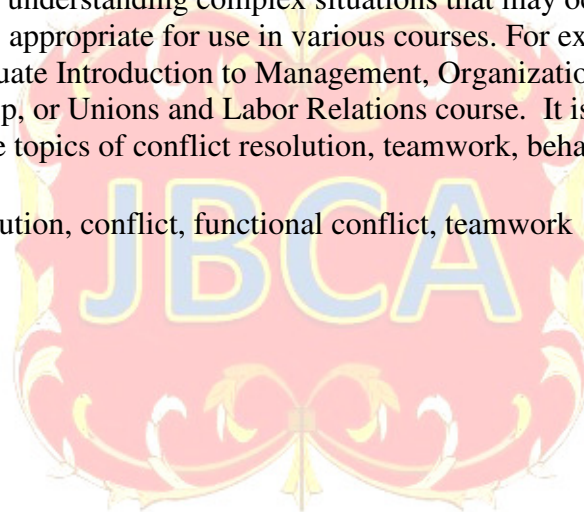
INTRODUCTION

Conflicts are common aspects of organizational life. People can face various conflicts throughout the course of a day and there are various types of conflicts. For purposes of this case study, intragroup conflict will be focused upon. Intragroup conflict occurs among individuals within a team. Differences could arise from differences in personalities to differences in views or opinions. If disagreement disrupts the harmony in the team, guidance may be needed in order to solve the conflict situation.

There are those that view conflict as negative, citing stress, and social chaos as reasons to avoid them. In addition, cite that the most significant indicator of a positive relationship is in fact the absence of conflict (Dincyurek & Civelek, 2008.) People in organizations can see conflict causing hostility, mistrust among members, and interfering with organizational operations. However, since conflict is, in reality, unavoidable, focus should turn to solving the conflict in a functional manner, where the likelihood of keeping the relationship intact remains more plausible. Research indicates that if solved in a functional way, using a proven strategy, conflict can result in various positive results. Results such as stimulating innovative ideas and shaping more effective and productive ways of employing management techqniues(Bornstein & Erev, 1997.) Behfar, Peterson, Mannix, & Trochim (2008) state teams that don't choose proper resolution strategies will most likely be prone to continuous, and escalating conflicts that take members away from important job tasks. One key component to understanding team performance lies in understanding the choices teams make when deciding upon what resolution strategy to employ. This is important, as teams that are able to functionally solve conflicts will most likely be satisfied and perform more effectively.

There are various conflict resolution techniques. For purposes of this case study, Thomas-Kilmann conflict model (2002) is utilized. Here, there are 5 different styles of resolution with two dimensions of concerns. Each style results in a win-lose situation. Since there are advantages and disadvantages to each style, one best style for each and every conflict may not exist. However, research does show that the most effective style to use in the majority of conflicts will be collaborative (Ohbuchi & Suzuki, 2003.) In a collaborative style, a win-win situation is created. The team members assertively attempt to jointly resolve the conflict with a solution more agreeable to all parties. This style, sometimes called the problem-solving style, uses assertiveness and cooperation based on open and honest communication. This style, though very effective, may tend to be underutilized due to the time it takes and the level of skills needed to effectively implement. As with other responsibilities in the workplace, effective conflict resolution will take knowledge, skills, and ability on the team members' parts. Therefore, management should think about taking the time to train employees in conflict resolution in order to promote team satisfaction and increased performance.

The remaining four styles in the Thomas-Kilmann conflict model (2002) include avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and competing. Avoiding produces a lose-lose situation as the conflict is not resolved. In fact, a disadvantage to this style if the problem isn't resolved, it may in fact get worse. Accommodating produces a win-lose situation. One party attempts to resolve the conflict by passively giving in to other. By being unassertive and cooperative, the party attempting to resolve does so without satisfying his or her own needs. Competing also produces a win-lose situation. The party attempts to resolve the conflict with aggressive behavior, and in attempt to get her or her own way. Compromising produces a win

some-lose some situation. The user attempts to resolve the conflict using assertive or give-and-take. Compromise can lead to counterproductive results.

Matsudaira (2017) states that by leaning into conflict, rather than trying to avoid it, productive results will happen faster. By taking the time to lean into conflict and solve problems in a functional way, it can help the team work better together. Working better together will lead to many benefits, one being increased performance. Matsudaira (states) "it's a pretty good thing to be known as the person who can help everyone get on the same page and get back to being productive."

THE CASE

Professor Randolph was in her office late one Wednesday afternoon. She heard loud voices coming down the hall, getting louder by each second. She looked up from her desk and four students appeared in the doorway, still exchanging words loudly. She knew the students; they were the current officers in a student club that she advised. The officers were newly appointed, two months ago to be exact. She quickly asked them what was going on. All four of them began speaking at once, not taking into consideration what anyone else was saying. Professor Randolph asked them to sit down and explain what happening; one person was at a time. They sat, and then the President of the club quickly started talking. She began by saying that none of the other officers informed her of what they were doing, they weren't fulfilling their obligations to the club, and she had to do everything or it wouldn't get done. The Secretary quickly spoke up and said that it didn't matter if they told the President anything, as she didn't listen to them. The Secretary cited several examples of trying to give the President her opinion on club business, only to be cut off, told her ideas were "dumb", and not listened to. The Treasurer then began talking and said that no one included her in anything, and she wasn't even told about officer meetings. The Vice President interrupted her and said that if she would check her e-mails, she might know what was going on. The Vice President continued and said that she was tired of trying to work with someone that didn't respect her opinion.

By this time, Professor Randolph realized there were critical problems that had to be addressed.   She knew that the club running smoothly was dependent upon the officers working as a cohesive unit; as a team. However, Professor Randolph needed to gain a better perspective on the root cause of these issues, at this time they all just seemed to be pointing fingers at each other, not addressing the problems in a functional way. Professor Randolph told each officer that a statement needed to be drafted by each one of them. She told them that each of their statements needed to include the following: 1. A thorough description of what behaviors, and by whom, is bothersome, 2. An explanation of why each noted behavior is bothersome, 3. Consequences of not addressing each noted behavior, and 4. At least three possible solutions to solving each noted behavior. Professor Randolph then told the officers that they would meet Friday afternoon to discuss each of their statements.

The officers arrived at Professor Randolph's office on Friday afternoon as planned. The officers each had their statements. Professor Randolph explained that the meeting would go as follows: Each officer would present her statement, without interruption from anyone. After each statement is presented, Professor Randolph would facilitate a discussion. During the discussion, the other officers could respond to the statement that has just been presented. After this discussion, Professor Randolph would facilitate a discussion where solutions are agreed upon

and commitment to changes is documented. Professor Randolph would end the meeting by scheduling a follow up meeting to gauge progress on decided upon solutions.

President's Statement: I do everything. None of the other officers are fulfilling their responsibilities. If I don't do it, it doesn't get done. This bothers me because I feel overwhelmed. I have 15 credits this semester and a part-time job and I'm falling behind in both my class work and the club work. If this isn't fixed, I will be forced to resign as President. I cannot continue to do everything, with no help. The three solutions I have are as follows: 1. A weekly officer meeting to discuss what needs to be done for that week. 2. A written commitment from each officer that she will fulfill her obligations as outlined in our   Constitution. 3. A weekly e-mail from each officer explaining to me what she's done for the week.

Discussion that took place after the President's statement: Vice President: The only reason you do everything yourself is because you won't give anyone else a chance to do anything. You go behind our backs and do things. Treasurer: I don't even know what's going on, I feel like I'm not needed. The President begins to tear up at this point and walks out of the meeting. She's obviously emotional. Professor Randolph tells the officers to wait in her office and she goes in the hall to find the President. Professor Randolph finds the President and asks her if she's ok. She tells Professor Randolph that she feels that she is being personally attacked. Professor Randolph convinces her to return to the meeting. Upon return, Professor Randolph tells the officers they need to explain their concerns while still trying to be as respectful as possible, so further damage to interpersonal relationships are evaded.

Vice President's Statement: I am bothered because I feel like no one respects my viewpoint or opinion. I will have something to say at our meetings and I'm immediately cut off, usually by the President. She doesn't let us say much, she dominates all meetings. This bothers me because we all have important things to say, not just her (President.) I have some good ideas and things I would like to discuss but am not given the opportunity. We do what she (President) wants. If this doesn't change, I am going to leave the club. I also know that other members aren't happy and they will leave the club as well. We won't have a club left.   The solutions I came up with are: 1. Rotate leading meetings. Each of us should get to lead a club meeting, not just her (President.) 2. Tell her (President) that she cannot treat people the way she does. 3. Communicate better.

Discussion that took place after the Vice President's statement: President: I agree, we need to communicate better. I do things myself because I know everyone is busy and figure it's easier to do it myself. However, I realize that might not be the best idea because I get behind on my own work. Secretary: You know we are all more than willing to do our part, in fact we want to. The secretary continues and makes her statement.

Secretary's Statement: I am not listened to at all, well mainly by the President. She acts like I'm not even at the meetings. Don't get me wrong, personally I really like her (President) in fact we hang out on the weekends. But, it's very hard to work with her. I really want to make it work but I feel like there aren't any solutions, I think it's just how she is. I'm sorry, I don't have three solutions written down, I couldn't come up with any.

Discussion after Secretary's statement: President: We really do have to change things, otherwise the situation will just get worse. Our members are starting to sense our tension, I know we have to work on this. Treasurer: I agree, but I'm not sure you (President) can do it.

Treasurer's Statement: I do not get any communications about meetings until after they occur. It's true, I don't check my e-mail every day, but the meetings are scheduled last minute most times. So, if I don't attend the meeting, I get a rude e-mail from the President telling me

that I will be replaced if I don't take my role seriously. I feel the consequences of letting this behavior continue is unhappy officers that don't want to continue in their roles. I see solutions as the following: 1. Having roles and responsibilities outlined. 2. Having a protocol for how often we need to check e-mail. 3. Not scheduling last minute meetings. Give us at least a week's notice.

Discussion after Treasurer's Statement: Professor Randolph: Thank you for all sharing your thoughts, concerns, and possible solutions. I think we all agree that changes have to be made in order for the club to function effectively. Right now, I would like all of you to sit down and together decide the next steps that should be taken in order to begin to resolve the conflicts that have been occurring.

At this point, the professor in the classroom setting will have the students break into teams of 4. The application can be done in two different ways:

Possibility # 1: The professor will instruct each team to decide upon their solution(s) to the conflicts. Teams will be given 15-20 minutes to discuss, then each team will debrief to the class on their agreed upon next steps, or solutions. Student teams will come up with various solutions. Some will be renditions of the solutions offered in the case and some solutions may be ideas brought up by the students reading the case.

Possibility # 2: Each team will be assigned a conflict management style by the professor. The team must use their assigned style to solve the conflicts. They will have 15-20 minutes to decide how they will use their style to solve the conflicts. Each team will debrief, explaining their assigned style of conflict resolution, what they will do to solve the conflicts, and the possible implications of implementing their assigned style in this particular situation. *The assigned conflict resolution styles would be: avoiding accommodating, competing, compromising, and collaborating.

Next, a discussion with the entire class will take place once the small team work is complete. The professor will lead a discussion that explains five conflict resolution styles and explain the advantages/disadvantages of each one.

The overall discussion objective is intended to help the students understand the importance of resolving conflict in a functional way. There are various ways to resolve conflict. The lesson here focuses on 1. Learning about each of the 5 styles of conflict resolution , 2. Understanding the advantages and disadvantages of each style of conflict resolution, 3. Realizing when it's appropriate to use each of the five styles and learn what style will lead to the most effective results most often.

Remainder of Case Study:

Once the steps to resolutions are agreed upon, the officers and Professor Randolph decide they will meet again in two weeks to assess progress. Follow up is a crucial aspect to conflict resolution, as it's important to assess progress and the effectiveness of the implemented solutions.

TEACHING NOTE (Instructor's Manual)

OVERVIEW

       This case is based upon events that occurred within an undergraduate student club in a University, therefore it's believed that students can easily identify with a setting of this nature. There are a couple different ways instructors can use this case study in class. Students should read the case and prepare notes for discussion to be held during class. If the students read the case on their own, they will be ready to come to class and implement the possibilities # 1 or # 2 outlined in the case study.   Alternatively, the instructor could bring the case to the relevant class period where conflict resolution will be discussed and give the students parts to play.   Students would assume the roles of President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer and act out the situation in class. After the role play, students would discuss the questions provided at the end of the case. In this situation, the case wouldn't be given prior to the class period where the students assume the roles. The instructor would give students their roles and dialogue during class and they would role play the situation followed by a discussion.

Class time required to discuss this case: 50-60 minutes.

       This case is appropriate for use in various courses. For example, it may be used in an undergraduate or graduate Introduction to Management, Organizational Behavior, Foundations of Leadership, or Unions and Labor Relations course. It is appropriate for use in any course that covers the topics of conflict resolution, teamwork, behaviors, and personality.
The model of conflict resolution used in this case is the Thomas-Kilmann model, which focuses on five various styles of conflict resolutions. The five styles are avoiding, competing, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating. More information about the Thomas-Kilmann model can be found in the reference section of this case study.

OBJECTIVES

       This case was designed to 1.) Introduce a concept on a level with which students can relate and 2.) Transfer what they have learned in the case to application in the business environment. The primary objective of this case is to introduce students to the concept of functional conflict resolution. More specifically, this case gives students the opportunity to assume various roles and try to functionally resolve a conflict situation. It will also help to encourage discussion about behavior in their current environment and encourage students to think of situations in their current environments (school, work, home) as a basis to understanding complex situations that may occur in the business environment.

END OF CASE QUESTIONS *WITH SUGGESTED ANSWERS

Which style of conflict resolution will bring about the most effective solutions most often? Why?

This question is aimed at getting the students to understand the importance of using the collaborating conflict style when resolving conflicts. This type of conflict resolution is aimed at independent critical thinking, concern for both ones' own needs and the needs of others, and tends to help bring about the most effective solutions most often. Of course, it should be noted, that there may be instances when another type of style is justified, conflict management is situational and will depend upon the parties involved and the situation.

Which style is the most difficult to implement successfully? Why?

The collaborating style tends to be most difficult to implement due to the time it takes, level of complexity, and skill level needed. It can be underused due to these factors. That being said, it's important for leaders/managers to make themselves aware of this style and take the time to learn how to use it effectively.

Shouldn't we try to eliminate conflict in our organizations?

There are two types of conflict, functional and dysfunctional. Dysfunctional conflict can be detrimental to organizations. However, functional conflict, if handled appropriately can bring about positive results to those in organizations. For example: functional conflict can bring about creativity and innovation. So, no, functional conflict shouldn't be eliminated.
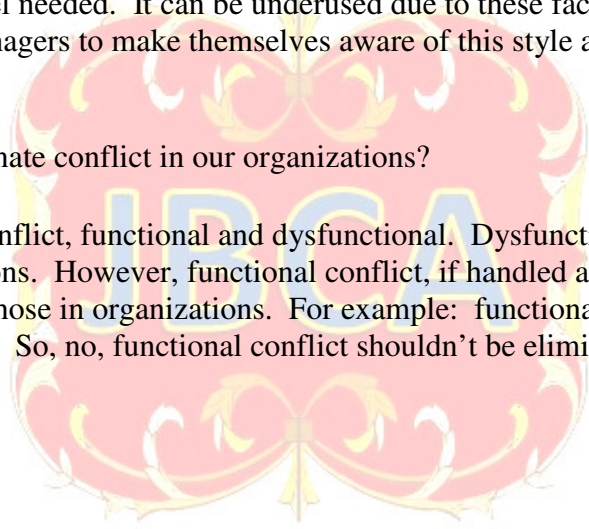
STUDENT HAND OUT FOR DISCUSSION: 5 STYLES OF CONFLICT RESOLTUION

Conflict Resolution Strategies
5 styles based on 2 dimensions of concerns:
Concern for others' needs
Concerns for your own needs
Each style results in a win-lose situation
Conflict style you tend to use most is based on your personality and leadership style
There are advantages and disadvantages to each style, no one best style for all situations
Conflict can be functional, therefore do not try to eliminate all together.

1. Avoiding Conflict Style: (lose-lose) conflict is not resolved.
Advantage: may maintain relationships
Disadvantage: get walked on, conflict not solved, problems may get worse, longer you wait the more difficult confrontation is
Appropriate when conflict is trivial, confrontation will damage an important relationship; your stake is not high
2. Accommodating Conflict Style: (win-lose) User attempts to resolve the conflict by passively giving into the other party. You are being unassertive but cooperative; you attempt to satisfy without fulfilling your own needs.
Advantage: relationships are maintained
Disadvantage: counterproductive, overuse may lead to the other party taking advantage of you.
Appropriate when maintaining the relationship outweighs all other considerations, changes agreed to are not important to the accommodator but they are to the other party
3. Competing Style: (win-lose) User attempts to resolve the conflict by using aggressive behavior to get their own way, you are uncooperative and aggressive, doing whatever it takes to fulfill your own needs. Use authority, threaten, intimidate, and call for majority rule when they know you will win.
Advantage: better organizational decisions will be made, when the forcer is correct, rather than the less-effective compromised decisions
Disadvantage: overuse leads to hostility and resentment toward its user. Forcers tend to have poor human relations. Appropriate when unpopular action must be taken on important issues, conflict resolution is urgent, relationships are not important
4. Compromising Conflict Style: (I win some/you win some) Attempts to resolve the conflict through assertive, give-and-take concessions. You are moderate in assertiveness and cooperation.
Advantage: conflict is resolved relatively quickly, working relationships are maintained
Disadvantage: compromise may lead to counterproductive results, an overuse of this style leads to people playing games such as asking for twice as much as they need in order to get what they want. Appropriate when issues are complex and critical and there is no simple or clear cut solution, parties have about equal power and are interested in different solutions
5. Collaborating Conflict Style: (win-win) User assertively attempts to jointly resolve the conflict with the best solution agreeable to all parties. It's also called the problem-solving style. You are being assertive and cooperative. Collaborator is concerned with finding the best solution to the problem that is satisfactory to all parties. Collaborator is willing to change if a better solution is presented. Based on open and honest communication.

Advantage: tends to lead to the best solution to the conflict, using assertive behavior
Disadvantage: skill, effort, and time is usually longer than the other styles. Appropriate when you are dealing with an important issue that requires an optimal situation, and compromise would result in suboptimzing, maintaining relationships is important, time is available, it is peer conflict
Collaborative style is the most difficult to implement successfully due to the complexity and level of skill needed. It's the most likely to be underused when it would have been appropriate.

Reference: Thomas, K.W. & Kilmann, R. (2002). *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*, CPP, Inc.

REFERENCES

Behfar, K.J., Peterson, R.S., Mannix, E.A, & Trochim, M.K. (2008). The critical role of conflict resolution in teams: a close look at the links between conflict type, conflict management strategies, and team outcomes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93(1), 170-188.

Butler, D.S. & Mullis, F. (2001). Forgiveness: a conflict resolution strategy in the workplace. *The Journal of Individual Psychology,* 57(3), 26-272.

Dincyurek, S. & Civelek, A.H. (2008). The determiniation of the conflict resolution strategies of university students that they use when they have conflict with people. *The Behavior Analyst Today*, 9, (9.3 and 9.4), 215-233.

Ken-ichi, O, & Suzuki, M (2003). Three dimensions of conflict issues and their effects on resolution strategies in organizational settings. *The International Journal of Conflict Management*, 14(1), 61-73.

Kilmann Diagnostics. (2017). *An overview of the Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument (TKI).* Retrieved August 12, 2017, from http://www.kilmanndiagnostics.com/overview-thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument-tki

Matsudaira, K. (2017). Resolving conflict. *Communication of the ACM*, 60(1), 42-44.

Salami, S.O. (2010). Conflict resolution strategies and organizational citizenship behavior: the moderating role of trait emotional intelligence. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 38(1), 75-86.

Thomas, K.W. & Kilmann, R. (2002). *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*, CPP, Inc.

Webb, C.E., Coleman, P.T., Rossignac-Milon, M., Tomasulo, S.J., & Higgins, E.T. (2017). Moving on or digging deeper: regulatory mode and interpersonal conflict resolution. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 112(4), 621-641.